

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Claims 1-14. (Cancelled).

15. (Currently Amended) A method of reducing improper returns of consumer products, the method comprising:

receiving serial number formats of the consumer products;

defining serial number masks that characterize the serial number formats,

respectively;

providing the serial number masks with at least a first character that describes variables of the serial number format; [[and]]

storing a product registration program that effects storing and maintenance of a product registration database at a time of product purchase in accordance with the serial number masks; and

providing the serial number mask with a second character that describes a check digit of the serial number format.

16. (Cancelled).

17. (Currently Amended) A method according to claim ~~15~~<sup>16</sup>, further comprising providing the serial number mask with a third character that describes constants of the serial number format.

18. (Currently Amended) A method according to claim ~~15~~16, further comprising attaching a check digit algorithm to the serial number mask, wherein the check digit algorithm defines a manner of calculating the check digit of a particular serial number.

19. (Original) A method according to claim 18, further comprising defining the check digit algorithm with six arguments, including starting position, ending position, direction, multiplier, multiplier position, and multiplier reduction.

20. (Original) A method according to claim 15, wherein the step of providing the serial number mask with at least a first character comprises providing the serial number mask with a plurality of the first characters corresponding to a number of variable digits in the serial number format.

21. (Original) A method according to claim 20, further comprising providing the serial number mask with a fourth character that describes a special constant identifier.

22. (Original) A method according to claim 21, wherein the special constant identifier is one of a UPC code for a product, a model number for the product, and a vendor specific code for the product, and wherein the fourth character is different for each different special constant identifier.